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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HIGHLIGHTS U.S. PROGRAMS IN BICOL

¶1. (U) Summary. During a July 4 visit to Legaspi City and the Bicol region, the Ambassador focused public attention on Philippine-American Friendship Day, the Fourth of July, and U.S. programs benefiting the region. Joined by Admiral Crowder, the Commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, the day's events celebrated U.S. Navy assistance to typhoon-damaged communities as part of Peleliu Pacific Partnership 2007, which included the building of new homes for displaced families and the handover of pallets of goods to a local NGO for community assistance. The trip highlights included a formal announcement of US\$5 million in disaster reconstruction assistance from the USG (through USAID) and a reception for regional leaders aboard the U.S.S. Peleliu. Press coverage of these events in local and national media was extensive and positive.

BACKGROUND

¶2. (U) Legaspi City, the capital of Albay Province in Bicol Region, lies on the southeastern peninsula of Luzon, the largest island in the Philippines. Agriculture and fishing are major factors in the province's economy. Mt. Mayon is the most prominent of the several volcanoes in the province, and recent eruptions caused significant destruction and many deaths. Facing the Pacific Ocean, the region is often struck by typhoons.

U.S.S. PELELIU SAILORS HELP LOCAL COMMUNITY

¶3. (U) In November 2006, Typhoon Reming devastated the Bicol region and displaced thousands of local citizens. The Honest Anislag Daraga Transition Center has served as a relocation center for families left homeless by the typhoon, with separate charity groups running different sections. Through the Peleliu Pacific Partnership, U.S. sailors are building 35 new homes for needy families. The Ambassador visited the site for a ceremonial ribbon-cutting in front of a large media presence. More than 50 U.S. Navy personnel worked on the Center.

¶4. (U) The Ambassador also presided over a ceremony for Project Handclasp, involving the turnover of pallets of goods to an NGO in the community of Tabaco, around 45 minutes north of Legaspi. Project Handclasp is a charity that receives donated goods, which U.S. Navy ships deliver on a space-available basis. The NGO, Simon of Cyrene, promotes the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. Donated goods included clothing, toys, books, food, and first-aid supplies. This event also had a significant media presence as well as the presence of the mayor of Tabaco.

USAID FUNDS MILLIONS IN RECONSTRUCTION ASSISTANCE

¶5. (SBU) In Legaspi City, the Ambassador met with the Governor of Albay Province and the Governor of Camarines Sur Province. The newly elected Governor of Albay (formerly President Arroyo's Chief

of Staff and an ex-Congressman) described his vision for the development of Albay. He cited the province's infrastructure needs and plans, most notably a new international airport in Daraga, in the southern part of Albay. He described Daraga as a possible future center of investment, noting he had invited three universities to relocate there. He linked Daraga's development to the typhoon rehabilitation efforts, as many of the permanent housing sites are in that area. He expressed the hope that new homeowners there will constitute a new secure development and source of human resources. The Governor of Camarines Sur lauded his own province's human resources as well, citing several cartoons currently running in the U.S. that were produced in Camarines Sur.

¶6. (U) In the People's Hall of the Albay Provincial Capitol Building with a crowd including the media, local dignitaries, and NGOs, the Ambassador announced the USG's plans to provide US\$5 million for typhoon reconstruction assistance in Bicol, with USAID giving two grants, one going to Save the Children (SAVE) and the other to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). These funds will be used to rebuild the lives of affected families by: restoring or providing permanent shelters, community infrastructure, and water and sanitation facilities; providing basic household supplies; supporting the rehabilitation and diversification of livelihood; and offering capacity building for disaster risk reduction. IOM is expected to build up to 1,000 new homes and 8 community centers. The Governor of Albay offered special thanks on behalf of the people of Albay to the U.S. Congress and especially to U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye for sponsoring these projects. At the end of the ceremony, the Governor formally proclaimed the Ambassador a "Daughter of Albay Province."

PEACE CORPS OUTREACH

¶7. (U) The Ambassador also had lunch with local Peace Corps

MANILA 00002359 002 OF 002

Volunteers to discuss local projects and express appreciation for their commitment and hard work.

MEDIA COVERAGE

¶8. (U) Close cooperation between PAS and the U.S.S. Peleliu's public affairs team resulted in ten members of the international and national media flying to Bicol from Manila; all spent the night onboard the ship and covered all of the Ambassador's public events. The Ambassador and Admiral Crowder gave interviews to three daily newspapers and two national TV stations. Press coverage on the overall visit was outstanding; the next day's two largest daily newspapers in Manila led with page 1 stories and photographs of the U.S.S. Peleliu housing program and the pledge of \$5 million in USAID reconstruction assistance. Multiple newspapers have picked up wire services photos of U.S. sailors working at humanitarian project sites the press visited that day. The Philippine ABS-CBN cable news network featured a piece on the mature U.S.-Philippine relationship. Another TV station did a special report on the \$5 million assistance program. Both national commercial networks featured prime time news reports of U.S. sailors building homes for typhoon victims.

¶9. (U) The Ambassador gave a live radio interview to OKFM -- People's Broadcasting Network in Legaspi City, reaching an audience across six provinces with a strong message of Philippine-American friendship, focusing on the many USG development programs in the disaster-affected region.

U.S. NAVY FOURTH OF JULY RECEPTION

¶10. (U) The U.S.S. Peleliu hosted a Fourth of July reception on the ship for over 150 guests, including local dignitaries, NGO representatives, and Americans working and living in the region. Following remarks by the Ambassador, Admiral Crowder, and Commodore Stewart from the Peleliu Pacific Partnership, guests enjoyed a large barbeque buffet and a ceremonial cake cutting in a festive

atmosphere.

¶11. (U) The Ambassador's ongoing outreach to regional hubs throughout the Philippines continues to draw attention to the USG's multi-faceted involvement around the country, as do travels by other Mission staff. This activist approach underscores our broad engagement with, and interest in, the welfare of the people of this treaty ally and long-time friend.

KENNEY